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Even as we prepare to mark Holocaust Remembrance Day, European society's dark past of bigotry haunts our present

The following op-ed appeared in [The Guardian](#) on March 31, 2013.

As fellow Americans prepare to join their Jewish friends and neighbors in solemn [commemoration of Yom Ha Shoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day](#), on 8 April, for many, the question that haunts us is this: has [Europe](#) fully transcended its past? If the past decade is any indicator, it has not. Despite much soul-searching following America's liberation of that continent, European antisemitism persists.

In Russia, which I visited on behalf of the [United States](#) Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) last October, I heard how xenophobia and intolerance, including

antisemitism, fuel hate crimes by skinhead groups. In Belarus, the anti-Jewish utterances of President Lukashenko and the state media are coupled by a failure to identify or punish the vandals of Jewish cemeteries and other property. In Hungary, my parents' native country, the leader of its third largest party recently urged the government to create a list of Jews posing "a national security threat" – even as the government, including its parliament, condemned this statement.

Even in western Europe, where some of America's strongest historic allies reside, antisemitism also remains. Since 2000, anti-Jewish graffiti increasingly has appeared in Paris and Berlin, Madrid and Amsterdam, London and Rome, and synagogues have been vandalized or set ablaze in France and Sweden.

In Malmo, Sweden, physical attacks have fueled a Jewish exodus. A generation ago, Malmo was home to 2,000 Jews; today there are fewer than 700. In France, "unprecedented violence" took place last year, according to a [recent report by the security unit of France's Jewish community \(pdf\)](#).

There were 614 antisemitic incidents in 2012, compared to 389 in 2011. Earlier this February, a woman was arrested in Toulouse, France after trying to stab a student at the Ohr HaTorah Jewish day school where four Jews were shot and killed in March 2012.

Who are the perpetrators of these hateful acts? Some are neo-Nazis or members of skinhead groups. Others are religious extremists who distort the religion of Islam to advance their own intolerant agendas. Most are hostile to democracy and pluralism.

I am reminded of the recently unearthed statements of Egypt's President Morsi, depicting the Jewish people as "descendants of apes and pigs" whom Egyptian "children and grandchildren" must hate, "down to the last generation". As the daughter of [Holocaust](#) survivors, I found Morsi's comments evoked Europe's dark past from his Middle East locale.

Compounding the problem are four factors. First, European officials remain reluctant to identify the ideological or religious motivations of the perpetrators. Second, surveys show that negative attitudes towards Jews among Europe's population remain widespread. Third, these surveys confirm that some of this bias reveals itself through certain criticisms of the state of Israel: while no country is beyond reproach, when criticism includes language intended to delegitimize Israel, demonize its people, and apply to it standards to which no other state is held, we must call it antisemitism.

Finally, [as USCIRF has documented](#) , a number of European governments and political parties have added fuel to the fire by backing restrictions on vital religious practices. At least four countries – Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland – ban kosher slaughter. Authorities and political forces in Norway and Germany also have tried to ban infant male circumcision. These restrictions affect Muslims, as well.

What helps drive them is a monolithic secular ideology, which, like the monolithic state religion it replaced, views serious practitioners of [Judaism](#) , Islam, and other belief systems as outsiders. It also suggests a striking indifference to Europe's past persecution of Judaism.

Fortunately, over the past decade, Europe's largest [human rights](#) body, the [Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe \(OSCE\)](#), has taken firm stands against religious bigotry, including antisemitism. Humanitarian concerns demand nothing less.

Yet, there are other reasons to care. When Jews face trouble, so often do other minorities. And as the second world war taught a whole generation of Americans, the same forces targeting Jews often oppose freedom for all. The fight against antisemitism is a key element in freedom's battle against tyranny. It is a fight to preserve civilization and further human progress.

To paraphrase [Eric Hoffer, an American author writing half a century ago](#), as it goes with the Jews, so will it go with all of us. We are all in this together. As we recall Europe's darkest days, let this be our response to antisemitism. The stakes are too high not to stand for tolerance and decency.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, please contact Samantha Schnitzer at (202) 786-0613 or sschnitzer@uscirf.gov.